

THE METEORITES OF MR. FITZGERALD

BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM.

MR. SPENCER FITZGERALD, if still in England, is requested to communicate with "M." at Vagali's Library, Cook's Alley, Ledham Street, Soho.

Peter Ruff laid the paper down upon his desk. His eyes were set in an unusually retrospect state. Who was this whom sought to probe his past, to renew an acquaintance with a dead personality? "M." could be but one person! What did she want of him? Was it possible that, after all, a little flame of sentiment had been kept alight in her bosom, too—that in the quiet moments her thoughts had turned toward him as he had so often done to her?

Then a sudden idea—an ugly thought—drove the tenderness from his face. She was no longer Maud Barnes—she was Mrs. John Dory, and John Dory was his enemy! Could there be treachery lurking beneath those simple lines? Things had not gone well with John Dory lately. Somehow or other, his cases seemed to have crumbled into dust. He was no longer held in the same esteem at Scotland Yard. Yet could even John Dory stoop to such means as these?

He turned in his chair. "Miss Brown," he said, "please take your pencil."

He marked the advertisement with a ring and passed it to her.

"Reply to that as follows," he said: Dear Sir:

"I notice in the Daily Mail of this morning that you are inquiring through the 'personal' column for the whereabouts of Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald. That gentleman has been a client of mine, and I have been in occasional communication with him. If you will inform me of the nature of your business, I may, perhaps, be able to put you in touch with Mr. Fitzgerald. You will understand, however, that, under the circumstances, I shall require proofs of your good faith. Truly yours,

"PETER RUFF."

Miss Brown glanced through the advertisement.

"Did you say—'Dear sir'?" she asked.

"Certainly!" Peter Ruff answered.

She turned unwillingly to her machine.

"Mr. Fitzgerald is very much better where he is," she remarked.

"That depends," he answered.

"Who do you suppose 'M.' is?" she asked.

"With your assistance," Peter Ruff remarked, "a little sarcastically—with your very kind assistance—I propose to find out."

Miss Brown sniffed, and banged at the keys of her typewriter.

"That coal-dealer's girl from Street-ham!" she murmured to herself.

A few politely worded letters were exchanged. "M." declined to reveal her identity, but made an appointment to visit Mr. Ruff at his office. The morning she was expected he was palpably nervous. Miss Brown, who had arrived a little late, sat with her back turned upon him, and ignored even his usual morning greeting. The atmosphere of the office was decidedly chilly! Fortunately, the expected visitor arrived early.

Peter Ruff rose to receive his former sweetheart with an agitation perforce concealed, yet to him poignant indeed. For it was indeed Maud who entered the room and came toward him with a carefully studied embarrassment and half doubtfully extended hand. He did not see the cheap millinery, the slightly more developed figure, the passing of that insipid prettiness which had once charmed him into the bloom of an over-early maturity. His eyes were blinded with that sort of masculine chivalry—the heritage only of fools and very clever men—which takes no note of such things. It was Miss Brown who, from her place in the corner of the room, ran over the cheap attractions of this unwelcome visitor with an expression of scornful wonder, who appreciated, with merciless judgment, the miming speech, her cheap, flirtatious mimicry.

Maud, with a diffidence not altogether assumed, accepted the chair which Peter Ruff placed for her.

"I am sure, Mr. Ruff," she said, looking demurely into his lap, "I ought not to have come here. I feel terribly guilty. It's such an uncomfortable sort of position, too, isn't it?"

"I am sorry that you find it so," Peter Ruff said. "If there is anything I can do—"

"You are very kind," she murmured, "but you see, we are perfect strangers to one another. You don't know me at all, do you? and I have only heard of you through the newspapers. You might think all sorts of things about my coming here to make inquiries about a gentleman."

"I can assure you," Peter Ruff said, sincerely, "that you need have no fears—no fears at all. Just speak to me quite frankly. Mr. Fitzgerald was a friend of yours, was he not?"

Maud simpered.

"He was more than that," she answered, looking down. "We were engaged to be married."

Peter Ruff sighed.

"Fitzgerald used to tell me everything," "You were his friend?" she asked, looking him in the face.

"I was," Peter Ruff answered fervently, "his best friend!"

She sighed.

"In some ways," she remarked softly, "you remind me of him."

"You could scarcely say anything," Peter Ruff murmured, "which would give me more pleasure. I am flattered."

She shook her head.

"It isn't flattery," she said, "it's the truth. You may be a few years older, and Spencer had a very nice mustache, which you haven't, but you are really not unlike. Mr. Ruff, do tell me where he is!"

Peter Ruff coughed.

"You must remember," he said, "that Mr. Fitzgerald's absence was caused by events of a somewhat unfortunate character."

"I know all about it," she answered, with a little sigh.

"You can appreciate the fact, therefore," Peter Ruff continued, "that as his friend and well-wisher, I can scarcely disclose his whereabouts without his permission. Will you tell me exactly why you want to meet him again?"

She blushed—blushed, in fact, all the signs of confusion which might have been expected from her.

"I suppose," she simpered, "I suppose you are one of those who think it a

crime for a woman who is married to

ever want to see, for a few moments,

an old sweetheart?"

"I am to understand, then," Peter

Ruff remarked, "that your reason for

wishing to meet Mr. Fitzgerald again is

purely a sentimental one?"

"I am afraid it is," she murmured;

"I have thought of him so often lately."

He was such a dear! I have never been

sufficiently thankful that he got away

that night. At the time, I was very

angry, but often since then I have

wished that I could have passed out

with him into the fog and been lost—

but I mustn't talk like this! Please

don't misunderstand me, Mr. Ruff. I

am happily married—quite happily married."

Peter Ruff sighed.

"I wonder," he asked, "if you would

do me the honor of lunching with me?

We might go to Prince's or the Carlton—

whichever you prefer. I will promise

to talk about Mr. Fitzgerald all the

time."

"Oh, I couldn't!" Maud declared,

with a little gasp. "I'd love to go—but

if we were seen! Wouldn't people

talk?"

Peter Ruff smiled. Just the same

dear, modest little thing!

"I can assure you," he said, "that

nothing whatever could be said against

our lunching together. A married lady

has always a great deal of latitude, you

know."

She looked up at him with a dazzling

smile.

"I'd simply love to go to Prince's!"

she declared.

"Call it a triumph," said Peter Ruff,

as Peter Ruff and his client left the room

together.

Peter Ruff returned from his lunch-

room in no very jubilant state of mind.

For some time he sat in his easy

chair, with his legs crossed and his finger

tips pressed close together, looking

stodily into space. Miss Brown watched

him from behind her machine.

"Disenchanted?" she asked calmly.

"I am afraid," he admitted, hesitat-

ingly, "that marriage with John Dory

has—well, not had a beneficial effect.

She allowed me, for instance, to hold

her hand in the cab! Maud would never

have permitted a stranger to take

such a liberty in the old days."

Miss Brown smiled curiously.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"She certainly did seem," he admit-

ted, "to enjoy her champagne a great

deal, and she talked about her dull life

at home a little more, perhaps, than

discreet to one who was presump-

tuously a stranger. She was curious, too,

about dining out. Poor little girl,

though. Just fancy, John Dory has

never taken her anywhere but to the pit

of a theater!"

"Which evening is it to be?" Miss

Brown asked.

"Supposing," said about Thurs-

day," Peter Ruff admitted.

"And her husband?" Miss Brown in-

quired.

"He happens to be in Glasgow for a

few days."

Miss Brown looked at her employer

steadily.

"Peter," she said, "are you going to

let that woman make a fool of you?"

He raised his eyebrows.

"Go on," he said; "say everything

you want to—only, if you please, don't

speak disrespectfully of Maud."

"Hasn't it ever occurred to you at

all," Miss Brown continued, "that this

Maud, or whatever you want to call her,

may be playing a low-down game of

her husband's? He hates you, and he

has vague suspicions. Can't you see

that he is probably making use of your

infatuation for his wife, to try and get

you to give yourself away? Can't you

see it, Peter?"

"I must admit," he answered, with a

sigh, "that some suspicion of the sort

has interfered with my perfect enjoy-

ment of the morning."

Miss Brown drew a little breath of

relief.

"What are you going to do about it,

then?" she asked.

"The subject of Mr. Spencer Fitzger-

ald," he remarked, "seemed, some-

how or other, to drop into the back-

ground during our luncheon. I pro-

pose, therefore, to continue to offer

to Mrs. John Dory my most respect-

ful admiration. If she accepts my

friendship, and is satisfied with it, so

much the better. I must admit that it

would give me a great deal of pleasure

to be her occasional companion—at

such times when her husband happens

to be in Glasgow!"

"And supposing," Miss Brown asked,

"that this is not all she wants—sup-

posing, for instance, that she persists in

her desire for information concerning

Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald?"

"I was just thinking that out," Peter

Ruff said mildly, "when you spoke."

On their next meeting, however, Peter

Ruff was forced to realize that his sec-

retary's instinct had not misled her. It

was, alas, no personal and sentimental

regret for her former lover which had

brought the fair Maud to his office. The

pleasures of her evening were insuffi-

cient this time to keep her from recur-

ring continually to the subject of her

vanished lover. He tried strategy—

jealousy among other things.

"Supposing," he said, "supposing I

were to induce our friend to come to

London—I imagine he would be fairly

safe now if he kept out of your hus-

band's way—what would happen to

me?"

"You!" she murmured, glancing at

him from behind her fan and then drop-

ping her eyes.

"Certainly—me!" he continued.

"Don't you think that I should be do-

ing myself a very ill turn if I brought

you two together? I am quite sure

that you still care for him."

She shook her head.

"Not a scrap!" he declared.

"Then why did you put that advertise-

ment in the paper?" Ruff asked, with

smooth but swift directness.

She was not quick enough to parry

his question. He read the truth in her

disconcerted face. Knowing it now for

a certainty, he hastened to her aid.

"Forgive me," he said, looking away.

"I should have asked that question."

"I think it would be safe for him to

come to London."

Maud recovered herself quickly.

"And you needn't be jealous, really,"

she whispered behind her fan. "I only

want to see him once for a few min-

utes to ask a question. After that, I

don't care what becomes of him."

John Dory, waiting patiently at home

for his wife's return, felt a certain

uneasiness when she swept into their little

sitting-room in all her cheap splendor,

with flushed cheeks—an obvious air of

satisfaction with herself and disdain for

her immediate surroundings.

He looked at his wife with darkening

face.

"Well," he remarked, grumblingly,

"you seem to find a good deal of pleas-

ure in this hiding about!"

"If I do," she answered, "you are not

the one to sit there and reproach me

with it, are you?"

"It's gone far enough, anyway," John

Dory said. "Understand me, Maud—

it's finished! I'll find your old sweet-

heart for myself!"

She laughed heartily.

"You needn't trouble," she answered.

"I am not such a fool as you seem to

think me. Mr. Ruff has made an ap-

pointment with him."

There was a change in John Dory's

face.

"You mean that your friend Mr. Ruff

is going to produce Spencer Fitzger-

ald?" he exclaimed.

"He has promised to," she answered.

"John," she declared, throwing herself

into an easy chair, "I feel horrid about

it. I wonder what Mr. Ruff will think

when he knows!"

"You can feel how you like," John

Dory answered bluntly, "so long as I

get the handcuffs on Spencer Fitzger-

ald's wrists!"

She shuddered. She looked at her

husband with distaste.

"Listen to me, Maud," he said, rising

to his feet. "You aren't a fool—not

quite. You've spent some time with

Peter Ruff. How much—think care-

fully—how much does he remind you of